

The halting journey to e-promised land



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When Dalton McGuinty boasts in his current television ad that he intends to run for re-election on his record, you can bet the mortgage that you will be hearing a lot about how you won't have to wait as long now for a hip replacement.

You will hear a lot less about the Ontario government's much more modest success in modernizing the health-care system so that it takes advantage of such newfangled inventions as the computer.

The Liberal government and its Progressive Conservative predecessor have spent \$458-million since 2002 on a program to create an online record-keeping system to replace the clipboards, file folders and faxes upon which health care now depends.

Progress has been slow. By the government's own admission, "the journey toward an integrated e-health system still has significant milestones ahead."

The judgment is a little more severe outside the Ministry of Health. The arm's-length Ontario Health Quality Council, which noted the "slow progress" toward an integrated system of record-keeping and patient case management, is critical of the ministry's "limited and uncertain investment plan."

A survey by the Ontario Hos-

pital Association found that most of the province's hospitals are only "marginally" or "minimally" ready to use electronic records for ordering laboratory tests or drugs or to share tests and notes with physicians or other hospitals.

Ontario trails at least five other provinces - including British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec - in the effort to build an e-health infrastructure, according to the federally funded Canada Health Infoway.

At the same time, the ministry is making steady but unspectacular progress in increasing the number of "smart" cards among the 13 million OHIP card holders.

There are five million of the old "dumb" red-stripe cards, which are often out of date and easily put to fraudulent use. (Residents of northern-tier U.S. states hold nearly 100,000 of the cards, for example.) About 400,000 "smart" cards are being registered annually, but the provincial Auditor-General estimated last year that it will take 14 years to phase out the old ones.

Governments are pursuing an e-health agenda because it offers the prospect of better care, cost savings and the prevention of potentially deadly medical errors. The current system, in which doctors record their notes on paper and communicate with colleagues by mail or fax, results in duplication of effort and often uncoordinated care.

Ontario would need to spend \$4-billion to implement an e-health system, but doing so could save \$30-billion over 20 years. But the halting journey

to the electronic promised land has become a political issue in time for the Oct. 10 election.

"Our health-care system needs to stop running on a clunky old Commodore 64 and get into the 21st century," Conservative Leader John Tory said. He is pledging that a Tory government would spend an extra \$540-million in the next four years to ensure an e-health system by 2014. However, he would also phase out the \$2.5-billion annual health premium.

Health Minister George Smitherman admits he faces an enormous challenge in getting thousands of doctors, clinics and hospitals to sing from the same online hymnbook. A strategy will be released during the campaign, but meanwhile, he said that converting the files of four million Ontarians with chronic diseases to the new system will be his priority, because these people will benefit most from integrated e-records. He said he is also working with health-care providers so that efforts so far are not made redundant by future spending.

It's not as easy as it looks, Mr. Smitherman insists. "John Tory dumbs this down to the point of making it seem it's no more complex than flicking a switch," he said.

